



X-Plain™ *Hepatitis C*

Reference Summary

Hepatitis is an infection of the liver that is caused by a virus. The Hepatitis C virus is one of many viruses that cause hepatitis.

About 4 million people in the United States are infected with hepatitis at any one time.

This reference summary will help you understand what Hepatitis C is and how to treat or prevent it.

The Liver and Hepatitis

The liver is an important organ of the body. It is located in the upper right part of the abdomen.



The liver regulates the body's nutrition system. After we eat food, it is digested and absorbed, then taken through large blood vessels to the liver.

The liver processes absorbed substances such as fat, sugar, protein, and vitamins so the rest of the body can use them.

The liver gets rid of harmful substances called toxins before they have a chance to poison the body.

The liver also makes bile; a yellowish liquid that helps absorb the food we eat. Bile is made out of a substance called bilirubin, a yellowish chemical.

Bile is secreted directly into the first part of the intestines through the common bile duct. It can also be stored in the gallbladder before being secreted into the intestines. Bile is what makes our stools a brownish green color.

The liver also makes special chemicals that cause our blood to clot when we are injured.

Viruses are extremely small germs that can multiply only after invading a host. Cold sores and the flu are caused by viruses. Viruses can be seen only with very powerful microscopes.

A virus called Hepatitis C can invade the human body through the blood or other body fluids. This virus causes a liver infection called Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C can lead to serious complications that affect the health of the liver and may even lead to death.

Symptoms

When a person becomes infected with the Hepatitis C virus, he or she may not notice any symptoms at first.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C are usually flu-like, including

- fever

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- chills
- stomach pain
- nausea
- fatigue

Sometimes Hepatitis C symptoms may be severe right away, causing liver dysfunction. If this is the case, bilirubin may not be excreted in the bile, leading to high levels of bilirubin in the blood.

With high levels of bilirubin in the blood, the skin and the whites of the eyes become yellow, causing a condition called jaundice. High bilirubin levels in the blood can also cause severe itching.



High levels of bilirubin in the blood also cause urine to look dark yellow. Stools are chalk white because they are not colored by the bile.

Over 20 years or so, Hepatitis C may lead to the destruction of the liver, a condition called cirrhosis. With cirrhosis, the liver cannot clean the blood or meet the body's nutritional needs. This could lead to coma or death.

When people with Hepatitis C drink alcohol, their chances of getting cirrhosis become much greater.

Patients with Hepatitis C have a higher risk of developing liver cancer.

Diagnosis

It is often difficult to diagnose Hepatitis C early because symptoms do not usually show up right away.

In order to find and treat Hepatitis C early, it is important to be VERY honest with the doctor when discussing drug use and sexual practices. If the doctor feels the need, he or she may do blood tests and discover Hepatitis C early enough to treat it.

Unfortunately, blood tests alone cannot show the exact extent of liver damage. A liver biopsy may be needed.

Treatment

Currently there are only 2 types of medications used to treat Hepatitis C.

1. interferons
2. ribavirin, called Rebetron®

Interferons are chemicals that boost the immune system and fight off the Hepatitis C virus. Ribavirin works directly against the Hepatitis C virus.

Unfortunately, Hepatitis C medications are only effective long-term in 10-40% of patients.

The combination of interferons and ribavirin has many possible side effects including

- headaches
- fever

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- loss of appetite
- fatigue
- nausea and vomiting
- increased susceptibility to infections
- bleeding problems
- birth defects

Women who have Hepatitis C should check with their doctor before getting pregnant. Medications for Hepatitis C can cause birth defects and the mother could infect her baby.

Risk Factors

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood and sexual intercourse.

The following people have a higher risk of contracting Hepatitis C:

- patients who received blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, the year when tests were made available to check for it
- people who have more than one sexual partner
- people who share needles or razors
- babies born to women who have Hepatitis C

Prevention

Since treatment for Hepatitis C is not always effective, it is best to PREVENT it rather than to have to TREAT it!

Four of the BEST ways to prevent Hepatitis C are:

1. Practice safe sex using condoms, knowing your partner, etc.
2. Do not share needles or other objects that may have come in contact with another person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes.
3. Use gloves if you expect to be in contact with blood or other body fluids.
4. If you decide to get a tattoo or a body piercing, make sure that the instruments used are sterile.

If you have Hepatitis C, there are certain precautions you should take to keep yourself and others as healthy as possible. The following pages include important guidelines for those who have Hepatitis C.

- Inform your sexual partners about your condition.
- Inform ALL your healthcare providers of your condition.
- Do not donate blood or blood products.
- Get Hepatitis A and B vaccinations.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Check with your doctor before taking any new medications, including over-the-counter ones such as acetaminophen or Tylenol®. You may need a different dosage than indicated or not take them at all, depending on whether they could damage your liver.
- Follow directions from your doctors about medications and tell them about any side effects you may experience.

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- Women with Hepatitis C should discuss pregnancy with a doctor BEFORE getting pregnant.



Summary

Hepatitis C is a very serious disease. It can go undiagnosed for years because it might not produce any symptoms at first.

Unfortunately, treatment for Hepatitis C is not always effective.

It is best to avoid Hepatitis C infection by taking simple preventive measures!

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